

ISSUES IN CANADIAN JEWISH HISTORY

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In attempting to provide an orientation to Canadian Jewish history in the short time available, I am not going to have the luxury of telling you everything about everything, or even everything about some things. For that I would need considerably more time--say a semester. What I can do, in the time allotted, is to pose a few questions and give the beginnings of answers, knowing that my colleagues will be filling in some of the blanks as the day goes on.

The first and most significant question concerning Canadian Jewry and its study I can think of is "is it important to anyone other than ourselves"? You bet.

In the world Jewish community Canada, with its Jewish population of approximately 350,000, is significant for its sheer numbers. In demographic terms, Canada ranks after such countries as the United States, Israel, Russia and France.

In Canada, Jews constituted opening wedge for multiculturalism/mosaic idea as opposed to the "two founding peoples" model. Native Canadians.

In Quebec, Jews are important as testers of the limits of societal acceptance of "others".

If then the study of Canadian Jewry and its history has its importance, then, like any other topic worthy of study, it must be contextualized.

In the context of modern Judaism and Jewish history, we have

to understand the influence of the premodern heritage of rabbinic Judaism.

Modernity was both a promise and a threat.

Modernity meant that Jews were no longer going to be coerced into being Jewish. Starting in the late eighteenth century, you had to **want** to be Jewish.

Some like to trace the history of the Jews in the Americas a long way back. Forgetting for the moment about those who thought of some or even all native Americans as descendents of the Ten Lost Tribes, or those who wonder whether Christopher Columbus (famous in the phrase a klog oyf kolumbus) was himself of Jewish origins, the true history of the North American Jewish community goes back to the seventeenth century and in British North America to shortly after the English conquest of Quebec.

It was their presence which raised the question, not completely answered to this day, whether North America is a "Christian" country. There is a nexus between Christianity and civilization that needs to be reckoned with.

The ambiguity of the Jews' readmission to England in the seventeenth century. Question of Jews participating in the political process as voters and as members of legislative assemblies. Maryland "Jew Bill". Quebec 1832. England later on in 1850s.

The story of the development of the North American Jewish community is one of successive "waves" of migration, each with its distinctive characteristics and problems.

Spanish and Portuguese (+ Ashkenazic minority)

German

Eastern European

Postholocaust

All this brings us to the next important question. In dealing with Jewish history in North America, one is obligated to ask "in what ways are the Canadian and United States experiences similar and different?" Is the Canadian Jewish experience distinct? The answer, truly a Canadian answer, is yes and no.

The early history of French North America: no Jews in French colonial possessions (though prior to 1680s there were nascent communities in Martinique and Haiti.

In British North America prior to the American Revolution, Quebec was the "fourteenth colony" and its Jewish community was in most respects parallel to those in the thirteen colonies to the south.

In the nineteenth century, Jewish immigration to British North America did not cease, but certainly it did not increase with the vigor that it did in the United States. Little German immigration to Canada. English immigration and influence. Because of this English influence, Canadian Jews tended to be more traditional in their religious practices than their American cousins. Anglican influence even though it was never an "established" church as in England (because of political influence of Scots). Reform was an American import.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, events and trends in Eastern Europe caused a massive emigration to Amerike. Those who wound up in the Dominion of Canada were not

always at first cognizant of the fact that this part of Amerike was a different country.

Did the Jews of Canada ultimately create their own culture? They were ultimately forced to create their own cultural space between the two founding cultures of Canada. This process can be Jews in Quebec.

In this Canadian Jewish culture there is something old and something new. Something borrowed or influenced by the United States and something blue---and white: zionism and Israel.

What does it mean to be a Canadian Jew? You will get more perspective on this question as we hear Professor Lightstone talk about how Canadian Jews express themselves religiously. Professor Oppenheim will speak to the non-religious ways in which North American Jews identify and Professor Joseph will address the question in terms of the ways in which the Jewish community acts and reacts as Canadian citizens and as Jews to the legislative process. Today is a beginning. There is much more to find out. Go and learn!